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# DRAMA AND MUSIC

## SIGNIFICANT HAPPENINGS OF THE MONTH

M. Brieux and "Maternity." — "The Silent Voice" and Mr. Otis Skinner.  
Miss Alice Brown's Prize Play.

BY LAWRENCE GILMAN

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It would not be easy at the moment to point to a contemporary dramatist who is estimated with a more diverting lack of unanimity than is M. Eugène Brieux. You may choose between the view of Mr. Bernard Shaw, that Brieux, after the death of Ibsen, confronted Europe as "the most important dramatist west of Russia," and the view of the majority of our exquisitely responsive theatrical observers, that he is not a dramatist at all, but a lay preacher—and a dull one at that—who tells stories that are "not nice." But, after all, this violent critical diversity is really a very handsome tribute to M. Brieux. If all our critics should find themselves in agreement with Mr. Shaw, and should unite with him in a joyous echo of Schumann's famous exhortation: "Hats off, gentlemen! A genius!" things would indeed look black for the author of *Les Avariés*. For there is nothing more ominous for the future of a creative artist than unanimous contemporary admiration. While it is possible to hear Richard Strauss and Claude Debussy dismissed as "mediocrities," while Maurice Maeterlinck is held to be "without originality" (as a prominent English review said of him the other day), one is encouraged to hope that future historians will not say of them what Mark Twain said regarding singers who have lost their voices and tumblers who have lost their legs: that "these parties cease to draw."

So we may all rejoice that M. Brieux is to-day regarded by many among the clairvoyant and enlightened public of the American theater as Mr. Shaw reminds us that he used to be

regarded in Paris: as "a mere pamphleteer without literary style"; as one "who was not a playwright at all," who wrote plays that are not plays; as one who was "not [in Sarcey's sense of the phrase] '*du théâtre*.'"

The occasion of these observations is the recent exhibition at the Princess Theater of Brioux's "Maternity." Mr. Richard Bennett, who achieved the miracle of turning "Damaged Goods" into a popular success, was the producer. It is no part of the present observer's function to guess why he was not able to perform the same feat with "Maternity." The taste of our theatrical public is hopelessly unpredictable. Concerning the play itself, it would be gratuitous to write at length, for it has been available in print for some years. It is probably the most valorous and the most effective cry of protest that has ever been raised in defense of the woman against society. Who that heard Miss Adrienne Morrison's thrilling delivery of her concluding speeches in the court-room scene will soon forget the terrific force of their naked Scriptural directness, their blunt and terrible veracity that was like a blow in the face?

You may call "Maternity" a "thesis play," if you like, or a "pamphlet," if you like. You may even call it "dull" and "undramatic." Each to his taste. There are some who find "The Master Builder" a weariness of the flesh; there are many for whom the last act of "Tristan und Isolde" is the abomination of desolation. It is futile to quarrel with esthetic inhibitions. It is only needful to say that for some of us this is an absorbing play, a passionate and bitter play, a tremendous play. It is filled from beginning to end with lines that sting and cut and burn, that sear the spirit and leave scars upon the soul. It flays by its wit, its irony, its incorrigible honesty. It is saturated with the pathos of life, with the *lacrymæ rerum*. In no other of his plays is Brioux so gripping, and nowhere is he so unanswerable. There is no more puissant fighter in the theater of our time, and here he fights magnificently.

His antagonists in "Maternity" are, as always with him, social hypocrisy and social injustice—chiefly the hypocrisy and the injustice which result from the attitude of society toward matters of sexual conduct. He is at war upon the pharisaism and the dishonesty of a society whose concept of morality is based upon what Mr. John Helston has pungently called "a curious conglomerate of Genesiac superstition and grocer-worship." He abhors the meanness, the callousness, the ignoble "niceness," the offensive prudery, of an age for which the su-

preme principle of existence is "a thing to be deplored and even hushed up in 'decent society.'"

"Maternity" is a "thesis play," if you will. It is also a haunting, an engrossing, an unforgettable drama. But it is not, in Mr. Meredith's words, "meat for little people or for fools."

Once in a blue moon one encounters a play built upon a noble idea—a play the emotional conflict of which is centered in the inner life of the spirit. When such a play emerges from the current theatrical welter, one is apt to remember that passage from the most winsome of living philosophers about "real life." Life, he there reminds us—the famous "real life": the outward life, the life we see and hear—expresses generally but very poor things. . . . "That other life which lies at the bottom of men's hearts and in the privacy of their conscience and in the unknown mysteries of this world, . . . that life is silent to our ears, but not to our sympathies." To what extent Mr. Jules Eckert Goodman, who has provided Mr. Otis Skinner with his present vehicle, "The Silent Voice," is responsible for its spiritual and imaginative texture, we cannot say: for the play is avowedly "founded on a story by Gouverneur Morris"; and concerning the nature and quality of Mr. Morris's story we are in regrettable but entire ignorance. At all events, the play, as it is disclosed at the Liberty Theater, has genuine spiritual force. In a careless and irrisory generation it dares to be idealistic; and if it had no other virtue than this, it would deserve to be extolled. Certainly it is an odd sight to come upon a play, visible (as we write) not a block from Broadway, which might, without presumption, point for its motto to that memorable saying of the *Bhagavad Gita*: "Who, through loving all as himself beholds Oneness everywhere, whether it be in joy or sorrow, that follower of union is deemed supreme." Yet no less than this luminous and profound aphorism of the Prince of Dvaraka became the guiding principle of Montgomery Starr's life, when, in his middle years, he, a musician who loved music (mark the qualification!), found himself not only bereft of his hearing, but shut away from his dearly loved young wife because she would not, in the phrase of the Parson in the *Canterbury Tales* "fleshly assemble" with him, lest their children be deaf. From this most heart-shaking of double afflictions, Montgomery Starr escapes by what the seers of the East called the Path of Liberation—that is to say, in a life of service and brotherhood, with his fabulously tactful and efficient

valet, Spring, as the instrument of his eleemosynary purposes. With the aid of a pair of opera-glasses and a gift of lip-reading, Starr observes the human comedy from the roof of his house, perceives its perplexities and its threatening disasters, and "plays God," as he says, to the suffering and the dismayed—answers the prayer of a girl whose needy and tuberculous lover must be sent away, procures a pardon for still another lover whose poverty has made him a thief. It is not until he becomes an unintending observer of a love affair between his wife and her young cousin that this amusing game threatens to have a less fortunate event. But, as it happens, this is just where Providence turns about and rewards *him*; for Marjorie suddenly discovers that she prefers her elderly husband to her youthful lover, and in the end Montgomery Starr has his reward—even to the full extent of his heart's desire, for Marjorie will not only give him love: she will give him children, even if they do prove to be deaf—thus indicating to us that not every woman takes the problems of maternity as seriously as does M. Brieux.

Clearly, there are the makings of a fine play here. It is a pity that Mr. Goodman has not been able to exert upon his material a more expert skill, a more heedful and competent art. The play as he gives it to us is fragmentary, choppy, episodic; and its solution, obedient to the tyrannical need of a "happy ending," is unpersuasive and incredible. The play is artificial and sentimental, rather than inevitable and quietly veracious. But it is very handsomely redeemed by the delightful acting of Mr. Skinner as the audacious rival of Providence. The part is not of the kind to which the histrionic prepossessions of this admirable player are most perfectly suited. It confines him too closely; its cut is too tight and formal for his picturesque and romantic style, and he seems at times a little ill at ease in it. Yet how beautifully, nevertheless, he denotes the spiritual progress of the man! How precisely and how vividly he can register an emotion or illuminate a trait of soul by means that are deceptive in their apparent simplicity and ease. Mr. Skinner has shown us more brilliant impersonations, but none more charming and adroit. The play is not otherwise conspicuously well acted, save for the sympathetic and delicate performance of Mrs. Skinner as Montgomery's devoted and tactful confidante.

Pity the jury in prize competitions for plays, operas, symphonies! If there is any unhappier situation than that occu-

pied by the jury in such cases, it is that occupied by the unfortunate prize-winner. Take, for example, the case of Mr. Winthrop Ames and the other experts who helped him to choose the worthiest of the 1,647 plays submitted in the contest for the \$10,000 prize which Mr. Ames—ever hopeful, generous, undaunted—offered for the best American play by a native playwright. Acting according to their lights, Mr. Ames and his associate judges selected as the most excellent of the 1,647 Miss Alice Brown's "Children of Earth," which Mr. Ames duly produced at the Booth Theater last month. The play, to the delight of certain benighted observers, proved to be one of the best American plays since Mr. Herne's "Shore Acres." Yet what was Mr. Ames's reward for his enterprise, for his hopefulness, for his fabulous patience in confronting those staggering 1,647 manuscripts? Upon the devoted heads of himself, Mr. Augustus Thomas, and Mr. Adolph Klauber (his fellow-jurors) descended a chilling drizzle of critical displeasure, suggesting inevitably the disheartening conclusion that those who were discerning enough to perceive the badness of Miss Brown's play had not, unfortunately, been asked to serve on the jury. As for Miss Brown, she too knows (for has she not been conspicuously told?) that her play is of small account and unworthy of its reward. Yet there are some—perhaps a not wholly dishonorable minority—by whom her play will be, in Swinburne's noble phrase, "remembered with distinction and mentioned with honor."

We have spoken of Mr. Herne's "Shore Acres." Not since the regretted passing from our stage of that remarkable work have we witnessed a rural play that is so wholly free from the note of travesty, of caricature, of sentimentalism, as is this play of Miss Brown's. Here is drama that deals honestly, simply, truthfully—and vividly as well as truthfully—with an order of life and of character perilously rich in temptations to the sentimentalist and the parodist. They are utterly of New England; and that, to a less sensitive and scrupulous artist, would have meant an irresistible temptation toward inexpensive and obvious humor, and equally inexpensive and obvious pathos. But Miss Brown, being the fine and delicate humanist that she is, knows that to deal profoundly with New England character is almost inevitably to deal with tragedy—the tragedy of that interior life of which we have spoken elsewhere in these notes. She might well echo the proud and bitter words of Browning, and say to her detractors that she

did not pretend to offer "such literature as should be a substitute for a cigar or a game of dominoes to an idle man." She deals, in "Children of Earth," less with action than with the springs of action. Yet, though no one is seduced or is killed or dies in her play—as our limited conceptions of tragedy seem to require—none the less this history of the souls of Mary Ellen Barstow, of her married lover Peter and his wife Jane, is of the stuff of tragedy. Chiefly, it is Mary Ellen's tragedy, as it is the tragedy of all those pitiful women who are the products of the New England tradition and the New England environment: who, through years of repression and self-effacement, have seen life and love and happiness pass them by; who have strangled their hearts and betrayed their bodies through timid surrender to a mistaken ideal of servitude and immolation, and who have gained thereby not spiritual control and valor, but merely spiritual dullness and inertia. For them there is no Land of Promise—or only one whose boundaries are lit with the dying radiance of lovely abandoned dreams, of foregone illusions, of exquisite regrets.

It is this that is the tragedy of Mary Ellen in "Children of Earth." She renounces life and love, only to find them again when it is too late—too late, not only because she must again renounce them, but because they come to her when her beauty is withering and when ecstasy can speak to her only in tones that falter and grow faint. In the spring-haunted woods where, at dawn, she keeps a tryst with her lover (how perfect was the setting of this scene, with its misty silver lights and its glamorous poetry of mood!), she keeps also a tryst with destiny. She foregoes her dream and her delight; but does the renunciation bring serenity, content? We are not told—the play ends upon a suspended cadence. At least, says Mary Ellen to her beloved, they are "going with the sun."

Here is a noble play, a play rich in observation, emotion, truth; rich, too, in vision. We are not likely to see upon our stage a finer, a more sincere transcript of American life—until Miss Brown gives us her next one.

LAWRENCE GILMAN.